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*Leaping Devils, Mutated Swine, and Deadly Doubles:
Dark Folklore in Early Victorian England (1830s-1870s)*

ABSTRACT: *This essay examines the discourse on supernatural occurrences and folklore during Britain's Victorian period. It analyzes an 1838 article, an 1859 editorial, and Princess Marie Liechtenstein's 1874 semi-autobiographical work "Holland House" to explore the phenomena of Spring-Heeled Jack, the mutated black swine of the London sewers, and doppelgängers. It argues that these seemingly bizarre aspects of Victorian myth were the direct result of anxieties stemming from modernization and urbanization.*

KEYWORDS: *British history; nineteenth century; Victorian era; London; folklore; myths; supernatural; Holland House; Spring-Heeled Jack; doppelgängers*

Introduction

On October 7, 1837, a young woman by the name of Mary Stevens was walking to Lavender Hill in south London when she was attacked by a mysterious humanoid entity. According to Stevens, it leapt at her from a nearby alley and proceeded to rip off her clothing; instead of hands, however, it possessed claws which Stevens described as "cold and clammy as those of a corpse."¹ This figure came to be known as Spring-Heeled Jack, and reports of his attacks soon spread across London and the rest of Britain. As bizarre as these reports may seem, Spring-Heeled Jack was hardly the only oddity of his time. Throughout the Victorian era, it seems as though every manner of supernatural creature was emerging to terrorize the unsuspecting masses. Stories abound of evil doppelgängers, who served as omens of death to all who saw them, and of giant, mutated black swine, who roamed London's sewers, killing both children and homeless adults.²

Urban legends such as these developed during a truly pressing time for London's citizens. Modernization and urbanization had skyrocketed the city's population to well over one million, and the fears and anxieties associated with these changes took dark and sinister forms. Contemporary publications in both *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*, as well as the 1874 work *Holland House*, a book written by Princess Marie Liechtenstein (1850-1878), spread the tales of these beasts and apparitions to the larger public, compounding the latter's already growing fears. These specific sources were selected for this analytical essay due to their connection to the Victorians' multiple anxieties.

¹ See Karl Bell, *The Legend of Spring-Heeled Jack: Victorian Urban Folklore and Popular Cultures* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 2-3. The account is based on "Lord Mayor of London Sir John Cowan's Letter to the Public Concerning Spring-Heeled Jack," *The Times*, January 8, 1838.

² For the black swine of the sewers, see "A Most Heinous Crime, Black Swine of the Sewers Blamed for Illegitimate Child's Death," *The Daily Telegraph*, October 10, 1859. For information on doppelgängers in the Victorian era, particularly their role as death omens, see Princess Marie Liechtenstein (Marie Fox), *Holland House* (first published 1874; London: Macmillan and Co., 1875).

The grime and rot found in the underbellies of large cities like London became the perfect breeding ground for fears of violence and death to manifest themselves in the Victorian psyche in the form of demons, mutated animals, and other supernatural creatures. Additionally, the fear of being lost or replaced in the endless crowds of those seeking better lives in London and similarly large cities became a very real threat. Using period texts, this essay sets out to present and interpret how Victorian writers reported these stories (giving credence to supernatural occurrences and thus spreading fear among the populace); it identifies and analyzes the factual origins of these urban legends; and it shows that they represented people's fears in a rapidly modernizing city of London.

I. Source Criticism

All three of the documents explored in this essay are textual. The sources focusing on Spring-Heeled Jack and the black swine of the sewers come in the form of an article and an editorial in *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*, respectively; they can be accessed via these newspapers' digital archives. Meanwhile, *Holland House* (1874) is Princess Marie Liechtenstein's firsthand account about her life in the titular home and about her experiences with unexplained supernatural phenomena, mainly her encounter with her own doppelgänger.³ Liechtenstein's work was re-published several times; the edition used here was printed in 1875.

The 1838 *Times* article on Spring-Heeled Jack takes up nearly half a page, while the 1859 *Daily Telegraph* editorial dedicated to the black swine of the sewers only occupies a space of about 5 x 5 inches.⁴ *Holland House*, on the other hand, is an exquisite volume, bound in burgundy leather with a ribbed spine and gold lettering and ornamentation on the front and back covers. The book contains a portrait of Princess Marie Lichtenstein on the first page and features eleven lithographs and eighty-eight wood-cut prints throughout the text. It is nine inches in height, six inches in width, and a total of 390 pages in length.⁵

The authorship of the article and the editorial is not as evident at first glance as it is in the case of *Holland House*. The article on Spring-Heeled Jack actually represents the printed version of a letter that the Lord Mayor of London, Sir John Cowan (1774-1842), sent to the public concerning the sightings of the mysterious apparition. Sir John Cowan served as the Lord Mayor of London from 1837 until 1838 and was the first elected official to address the sightings.⁶ There is some debate as to whether he truly wished to have the matter investigated or simply

³ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism*, Vol. I (London: Cassell and Company, 1926), 88-89. This work is a compilation of articles, firsthand accounts, and letters relating to Spiritualism and the sightings of ghosts or apparitions. Marie Fox's encounter with her own doppelgänger is documented here as an encounter with a possibly malevolent entity.

⁴ "Lord Mayor of London," *The Times*, January 8, 1838; "Most Heinous Crime," *The Daily Telegraph*, October 10, 1859.

⁵ Liechtenstein, *Holland House*.

⁶ Bell, *Legend of Spring-Heeled Jack*, 32.

wanted to quell rumors that Spring-Heeled Jack was attacking women all around London.⁷ In *The Unexplained: Great Mysteries of the 20th Century* (1994), Jenny Randles, a self-described ufologist and former director of investigations for the British UFO Research Association, argues that Spring-Heeled Jack served as an example of mass hysteria which was encouraged by the recognition of such an entity by high-ranking lawmakers.⁸ Due to the frequency of sightings and the demeanor of those claiming to have been attacked, officials of the Victorian era would have disagreed with such a theory, as the available evidence and witness testimony pointed toward an actual physical presence.⁹

The author of the editorial on the black swine remains anonymous, and it has been argued that he or she created the beast as a metaphor for the practice of child abandonment which was occurring as a result of pregnancies outside of wedlock, particularly among the elites of London society.¹⁰

All three of the sources used in this essay were composed with the general public as the intended audience. The article on Spring-Heeled Jack was penned as an address to the public; the editorial on the black swine was written as a warning to the public about the darker aspects of society and the dangers of the London sewer system; and *Holland House* was created to give the general readership an idea of what it was like to grow up in a big house from the perspective of the nobility.¹¹ The article on Spring-Heeled Jack and the editorial on the black swine would have circulated widely, however, their subject matters were eventually eclipsed by the infamous Jack the Ripper. Neither received the same level of attention as the Ripper murders several decades later (1888-1891); as a result, they have faded into obscurity alongside earlier urban legends and sightings of apparitions like the Hammersmith Ghost sightings of 1803 and 1804.¹²

The reception of these sources was mixed. The 1838 article on Spring-Heeled Jack stirred the public into a paranoid frenzy, with dozens of individuals – mostly women – claiming to have encountered him. This, in turn, resulted in a massive spike in sightings that lasted from 1838 until the final sighting in 1904.¹³ The impact of the 1859 editorial on the black swine of the sewers remains difficult to trace. It seems that only one major newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*, printed the story, but the urban legend of the black swine does resurface in several biographies

⁷ Bell, *Legend of Spring-Heeled Jack*, 35-36.

⁸ Jenny Randles, *The Unexplained: Great Mysteries of the 20th Century* (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., 1994), 41-44.

⁹ Bell, *Legend of Spring-Heeled Jack*, 76-78.

¹⁰ Thomas Boyle, *Black Swine in the Sewers of Hampstead: Beneath the Surface of Victorian Sensationalism* (first published 1989; London: Penguin Books, 1990), 55.

¹¹ Liechtenstein, *Holland House*, 12-14.

¹² See "The Hammersmith Ghosts," in *Kirby's Wonderful and Scientific Museum: or Magazine of Remarkable Characters*, Vol. II (London: Barnard and Sultzzer, 1804), 65-79.

¹³ Bell, *Legend of Spring-Heeled Jack*, 88.

and autobiographies of the period.¹⁴ *Holland House* (1874) remained popular enough throughout the Victorian era to merit additional printings of the text, with scholars and filmmakers of the twenty-first century utilizing the work when attempting to analyze or create stories about nobles or the supernatural in Victorian life.¹⁵

II. *Leaping Devils, Mutated Swine, and Deadly Doubles*

Featuring a letter from Sir John Cowan, the Lord Mayor of London, the 1838 article on Spring-Heeled Jack starts with the reassuring message to the citizens of Britain's capital that the fiend would be brought to justice, should he dare to make an attack in the city proper.¹⁶ The Lord Mayor's letter is the reply to an anonymous citizen who had sent a letter to the Lord Mayor, asking whether anything could be done about the reports of women – and several men – that they had been attacked at night by a mysterious figure. The Lord Mayor theorized that the person who had addressed the initial letter to him must have been one of the victims of Spring-Heeled Jack, and he encouraged victims to come forward so that more could be learned about the strange encounters with this entity.¹⁷ The Lord Mayor's letter is the first instance of "Spring-Heeled Jack" being used to label the assailant. Despite the assurance that the culprit would be caught, the Lord Mayor made no mention of the authorities investigating any respective sightings in the countryside.

The 1859 editorial on the mutated black swine allegedly living in the London sewer system is rather short in length and description. Tales of large, mutated animals living in the sewers of London and other major cities were common during this period, with rodents and swine in particular being most frequently reported. The 1859 editorial remains unique, however, because one of these supposed mutated creatures was "responsible" for a terrible crime.¹⁸ The writer claims that an aristocrat in Hampstead had fathered an illegitimate child with one of his servant girls. Once she had given birth, the father ordered her to abandon the child in the sewers where it was eaten alive by a gigantic, mutated black swine. According to the editorial, only a single piece of clothing remained.

Holland House tells the story of a massive Kensington estate and its art collection from the perspective of its author. Princess Marie Henriette Adélaïde of Liechtenstein (1850-1878), also known as Mary Fox, was an English writer who had been adopted by Henry Fox, 4th Baron Holland (1802-1859), an English nobleman who had no children of his own. Marie was raised as an aristocrat in the high society of the Victorian era and, in 1872, married Prince Aloys (Louis) of

¹⁴ Jacob Middleton, *Spirits of an Industrial Age: Ghost Impersonation, Spring-Heeled Jack, and Victorian Society* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2014), 56-57.

¹⁵ Jan Bondeson, *Strange Victoriana: Tales of the Curious, the Weird, and the Uncanny from Our Victorian Ancestors* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2016), 102.

¹⁶ "Lord Mayor of London," *The Times*, January 8, 1838.

¹⁷ "Lord Mayor of London," *The Times*, January 8, 1838.

¹⁸ Boyle, *Black Swine*, 67.

Liechtenstein (1846-1920); the couple had four children. Marie's legacy as a writer is based on her work on Holland House and its significant art collection.¹⁹

The titular house (Holland House), sometimes referred to as Cope Castle, is a sprawling estate located in Kensington, London. Originally constructed in 1605 by Sir Walter Cope (c.1553-1614), the estate passed through several prominent families in the course of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries.²⁰ Unfortunately, the grandeur of the estate from Marie Liechtenstein's time has been lost as a result of bombings which destroyed all but a few sections of the home during World War II; fortunately, the home's immense library remained relatively undamaged.²¹ At its peak of prominence, Holland House was hosting meetings of artists and prominent political leaders.

Marie Liechtenstein tells readers of her life growing up in the large home and of the expectations that her adopted father, Henry Fox, had of her.²² While the work offers a glimpse into the upper echelons of Victorian society, there are a few sections which talk about the supernatural phenomena associated with the manor. Marie Liechtenstein claims to have encountered her own doppelgänger one night, while traveling down the darkened corridors of the manor near its library.²³ According to her account, Marie and her double simply stared at each other for several moments until her double disappeared.²⁴ During the Victorian era, the idea of encountering one's doppelgänger was seen as an omen of death.²⁵ Marie had already established herself as a respected writer by the time of the book's publication, so her account has been taken more seriously than others. Because Holland House itself serves as the book's main character, when reading about this strange encounter, readers can interpret it as the house issuing a warning to Marie, thus reflecting the era's growing social and supernatural fears.²⁶

III. Analysis

The cultural and psychological landscape of Victorian London was one of change and fear. As modernization and urbanization took hold, Londoners were forced to come to terms with the fact that the city they had once known was gone. London was one of the first cities to reach a population of one million during this period,

¹⁹ Fiona MacCarthy, *Last Curtsey: The End of the Debutantes* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), 101-103.

²⁰ See Linda Kelly, *Holland House: A History of London's Most Celebrated Salon* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013).

²¹ MacCarthy, *Last Curtsey*, 68.

²² Liechtenstein, *Holland House*, 33-36.

²³ Liechtenstein, *Holland House*, 98.

²⁴ Liechtenstein, *Holland House*, 100.

²⁵ Jennifer Bann, "Ghostly Hands and Ghostly Agency: The Changing Figure of the Nineteenth-Century Specter," *Victorian Studies* 51, no. 4 (2009): 663-685, here 671-672.

²⁶ Liechtenstein, *Holland House*, 107-108.

and, as a result, anxieties and fears manifested themselves all across society.²⁷ The emergence of figures like Spring-Heeled Jack has been explained by scholars as representing societal fears about assaults from foreigners and strangers, particularly against women.²⁸ The initial description of the figure as a humanoid creature with cold, deadly claws made the imagination of Victorian readers run wild. The article in *The Times* was the first of many, setting a trend in sensational tales of the supernatural and inexplicable in the Victorian press. As the decades of sightings continued, Spring-Heeled Jack took root in the period's popular culture and became a boogeyman who would kidnap or torment those children who misbehaved or disrespected their parents.²⁹

Victorian Literature soon attempted to give Jack an origin story to explain his actions, with some accounts identifying him as a harmless prankster and others declaring him to be a ghost or demon.³⁰ As a representation of societal anxieties with regard to assault and violence, Jack occupied an important cultural niche as a creature to fear at night on London's streets, but this niche was quickly crowded with tales of ghosts haunting famous thoroughfares and the much more tangible threat posed by the murderous Jack the Ripper in the late 1880s.³¹

Due to the environment of rot and disease that sewers brought to the Victorian mind, the mutated black swine of the sewers can be seen as a metaphor for two issues which plagued the psychology and culture of the Victorian era, namely, the abandonment of children and the fears associated with pollution and modern sewer systems. Children born out of wedlock could pose serious threats to aristocrats and political leaders due to the scandals associated with the underlying premarital or extramarital affairs.³² The anonymous author of the editorial seems to have been desperate to expose an injustice and unspeakable practice, namely, child abandonment. Historian Thomas Boyle has argued that the black swine was created as a metaphor for this practice—a way to explain the disappearance and death of these children.³³ The identity of the aristocrat whose actions inspired the creature's creation remains unknown, though Boyle presumes the individual must have held an exceptionally high social rank as the editorial used to criticize him was published anonymously in *The Daily Telegraph*, a major London newspaper.³⁴

²⁷ Jennifer Westwood, *Lore of the Land: A Guide to England's Legends from Spring-Heeled Jack to the Witches of Warboys* (first published 2005; London: Penguin Books, 2006), 9-12.

²⁸ Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 51-52.

²⁹ Middleton, *Spirits of an Industrial Age*, 61.

³⁰ William J. Dotson, "Sacred Conspiracies: Spiritualist and Occult Politics in Britain, 1843-1916" (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 2005), 37.

³¹ Dotson, "Sacred Conspiracies," 77-78.

³² Boyle, *Black Swine*, 210-211.

³³ Boyle, *Black Swine*, 212.

³⁴ Boyle, *Black Swine*, 203.

Sewers were seen as places of danger and mystery across Europe. Historian Matthew Gandy discusses the mythological aspect of sewers for Parisians during the late Victorian era and states that they were seen as locations for the city's seedy criminals and other undesirables to gather.³⁵ Sewers, like cemeteries, were considered part of the so-called "urban uncanny" – an aspect of the city that appeared to pose threats or held a frightening sense of mystery which hindered exploration and often resulted in misinformation or urban legends.³⁶ Victorians subscribed to the concept of environmental degeneration – the idea that the pollution of an environment could lead to a decay of one's intellectual faculties.³⁷ For an already tense Victorian audience, the idea of a ferocious man-eating beast hiding deep in the city's complex sewer system made sense, as it externalized child abandonment in the form of a creature that could be avoided as long as one did not stray too far from the beaten path.³⁸ Better to face an externalized foe in the form of a mutated creature than to look internally at the harsh cruelties of those members of society who were expected to lead by example.³⁹

The concept of the doppelgänger (or "fetch") had existed long before Marie Liechtenstein put pen to paper. Early examples include the ancient Egyptian concept of "ka" or the idea of a spirit identical to one's own (including all memories and experiences), but gossip and literature of the Victorian era transformed the concept into something much more sinister.⁴⁰ Instead of simply being an uncanny phenomenon, doppelgängers took the form of omens of death.⁴¹ The idea arose that – if one encountered one's own doppelgänger – it meant one only had a few days to live before the doppelgänger would take one's place.⁴² Scholars appear divided on why this shift occurred. Some have argued that this change resulted from societal and cultural fears of losing personal and social identity as the population size of London and other European capitals began to skyrocket.⁴³ Others have offered a far more simple solution, namely, that Victorians were obsessed with death and the macabre.⁴⁴ Regardless of the interpretation, the impact of *Holland House* was considerable, and Marie

³⁵ Matthew Gandy, "The Paris Sewers and the Rationalization of Urban Space," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24, no. 1 (1999): 23-44, here 24.

³⁶ Boyle, *Black Swine*, 144.

³⁷ Clare Echterling, "Degeneration and the Environment in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction" (PhD dissertation, University of Kansas, 2018), 5.

³⁸ Boyle, *Black Swine*, 210-212.

³⁹ Boyle, *Black Swine*, 219-220.

⁴⁰ Westwood, *Lore of the Land*, 48.

⁴¹ Westwood, *Lore of the Land*, 55-57.

⁴² Westwood, *Lore of the Land*, 57-58.

⁴³ Bell, *Legend of Spring-Heeled Jack*, 72.

⁴⁴ Bondeson, *Strange Victoriana*, 112-113.

Liechtenstein is generally credited as a major contributor to doppelgänger literature by including her own encounter in her work.⁴⁵

Conclusion

By examining cultural and psychological aspects of Victorian society through the urban legends of Spring-Heeled Jack, the black swine of the sewers, and the concept of doppelgängers, this essay has shown how these dark tales impacted the psyche of Victorians who were living through a period of mass urbanization and modernization. The citizens of London and its surrounding towns were anxious about assaults, crime, death omens, and pollution. As a result, folklore emerged that involved entities and apparitions associated with these problems. Stories of humanoid creatures assaulting unsuspecting Londoners and giant mutated animals dwelling in the sewers kept newspapers in business and citizens in a state of paralyzing fear. The story of a doppelgänger in Holland House—a famed beacon of culture and art—only added to society’s unease. Popular culture in the twenty-first century continues to be fascinated with these urban legends, and future scholarship should study why this is the case. While there are various popular histories on urban legends of the Victorian period, a definitive scholarly synthesis on the topic has yet to be written. Perhaps the topic is too broad, given the wide range of legends from this period. Whatever the case may be, urbanization and modernization created monsters, and whether these are real or metaphorical remains in the eyes of the beholder.

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⁴⁵ Bondeson, *Strange Victoriana*, 133.